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UNCLAS CARACAS 000198

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

NSC FOR CBARTON  
USAID DCHA/OTI FOR RUSSELL PORTER

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: SOCI ECON PGOV VE  
SUBJECT: DENGUE AND THE POLITICS OF HEALTH CARE IN VENEZUELA

This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (SBU) A significant increase in the number of dengue cases in Caracas in December sparked concern about an epidemic among city residents (including the Embassy community). The upsurge in dengue, following shortly after an October 2003 outbreak of yellow fever, triggered questions about the GOV's public health capabilities. Ministry of Health officials admitted to the existence of a dengue "epidemic", but have downplayed the threat to public health. An opposition oriented epidemiological NGO claims Ministry assessments are politically rather than medically based and warns that outbreaks of yellow fever pose even more danger to the public health than dengue. The World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Venezuela was not alarmed by the rise in dengue cases but expressed concern about other public health issues including yellow fever, maternal mortality, and HIV/AIDS. He praised the GOV's new "Into the Slums" program, which places Cuban doctors in low-income neighborhoods, as a step in the right direction. END SUMMARY.

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DENGUE AT EPIDEMIC LEVELS?  
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¶12. (SBU) Dengue is a viral disease which is transmitted by infected Aedes Aegypti mosquitoes and usually results in a period of high fever and muscular pain in its victims. Less commonly, the hemorrhagic form of dengue can result in death. There are no vaccines against the 4 types of dengue and incidence of the disease in Venezuela typically rises seasonally, depending on the amount of rainfall. Ministry of Health Director of Epidemiology Jose Mendoza blamed unusually heavy rains in the last few weeks of the year for almost doubling the number of cases reported in the capital city in 2003 compared to 2002. This rapid increase in the number of dengue cases allows the use of the word "epidemic".

¶13. (SBU) According to figures published weekly by the Ministry, there were 2,666 dengue cases reported in Caracas by week 49 (November 30 - December 6) of 2003. Only 1,420 cases had been reported by the same week in 2002. National figures, however, showed 23,916 cases up to the first week of December 2003, compared to 36,658 cases in the same period of ¶12002. Countrywide there were 1,999 reported cases of hemorrhagic dengue which resulted in five deaths in 2003, three of them in Caracas. Although he acknowledged the existence of an "epidemic" in Caracas, Mendoza pointed to the year-on-year 34 percent decrease in national cases as proof that the Ministry was successfully working against the disease.

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FROM INADEQUATE INSTITUTIONS TO INCREASED VIRUSES  
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¶14. (SBU) Marisela Perdomo, President of an epidemiological NGO FUNDEPI, attributed the recent increase in dengue cases to Venezuela's failing health care infrastructure in a December 19 meeting with emboffs. The NGO, founded in 1993 with the help of the Ministry of Health, currently has nine independent epidemiologists affiliated with it. Although FUNDEPI maintains a close relationship with the MIG